Singing Saint Annamacharya: a Literary Offering at His Lotus Feet

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सदाशिव समारंभां शंकराचार्य मध्यमां अस्मादाचार्य पर्यंतां वंदे गुरु परंपरां

My respectful Pranamams are to the august gathering here. It is indeed a wonderful gesture on the part of the Organisers to have a "Sanghosti" on the earliest known Vaggeyakara and Sankirtanacharya Tallapaka Annamcharya, the doyen and pioneer of Carnatic Music tradition just three days before his 610th birth anniversary. I am very fortunate to be a part of this gathering and thank the Organisers for giving me an opportunity to place before you my thoughts about the Vaggeyakara. However I am also a little hesitant due to my limited proficiency in English Language. I will not be able to highlight many nuances and the richness of the prosody and the subtleties of the usage of certain phrases in the native language namely Telugu in the Kirtanas. Most important, I should also admit my extremely limited familiarity with Annamacharyulu and his literary works. I seek your kind indulgence. Thanks to this "Sangoshti", I could collect some literature on Annamacharya which served three purposes: (i) gaining some elementary knowledge of the bard, (ii) how various experts and pundits interpreted Annamayya kirtanas. We are going to listen to Shri Surendranath Garu on depiction of Nayikas in Annamayya kirtanas, and Ms Anupama Kailash garu of Hyderabad wrote even a book on the subject and converted that into a dance sequel in kuchipudi and vilasini dance style. The third purpose is not repeating of what has already been said about Annamacharya's sahityam except for the purpose of context.

Music is the universal language. The appeal of music is emotional, spiritual and enlightening. This can be experienced in sthayi music devoid of words and specified rhythms. Let us take an analogy to Dance or Abhinaya where we have sthayi (Mukaabhinaya) and sanchari (Abhinaya with accompanying song) Bhavas. The charm of sonorous language adds to the quality of dance which then resonates nicely with the audience. Even though we may say that music conquers the limitations of a language, but if the words complement a fitting music, it will have thematic precision and convey the mood in detail with the sanchari bhavas (dynamic feeling). In this regard the language in the Kriti form, will do full justice to the musical content supported with words. And to enhance the sharpness and eloquence of the word content of the language, it is beautified with a rich variety of prosody and rhetorical embellishments. Here the choice of a language which is naturally musical is an additional advantage to the composer. And in Carnatic music this seems to be undoubtedly Telugu. It is from this aspect we should view and analyse Annamayya Kirtanas. I will divide my talk into two parts. In the first part I will deal with Annamayya, the personality. In the second part I will deal with some of his Kirtanas.

It is not quite right to say that for more than 4 centuries until the early part of the last century the saint composer and his works were not known. In my opinion Annamayya sahityam was very much alive and his Kirtanas were being sung at different temples in South India (at least in Tirupati, Ahobilum, Tanjavur, Kadapa) in the form of Bhajans but their reach was limited. We were told that in 1922 music compositions of Annamacharya engraved on copper plates were found, discovered or unearthed from a small closed room (later renamed as Sankirtana Bhandagaram) adjacent to the Hundi in Sri Venkateswara swami temple in Tirumala. But reference to these copper plates could be found at least a century before 1922. Sometime ago I was searching internet for information on Telugu language and

its history. During these efforts, I came across a very old book on Telugu Grammar. The name of the book was "A Grammar of the Teloogoo Language" written by a Britisher, A.D. Campbell and published by College of Fort St. George, Madras in 1816 more than 100 years before the discovery of copper plates of Annamayya literature. Incidentally at that time Telugu was also called Gentoo. In the introduction part, Campbell recounted his efforts to collect as much literature available on Telugu Grammar at that time as possible and narrates under a footnote and I quote: "*Having heard that a number of poems, engraved on some thousand sheets of copper, had been preserved by the pious care of a family of Brahmins in the temple on the sacred hill at Tripetty, I deputed a Native for the purpose of examining them; but, with the exception of a treatise on Grammar, of which a copy was taken, the whole collection was found to contain nothing but voluminous hymns in praise of the deity*" Unquote.

Knowing the British mentality and their inquisitive mind and their quest for details, it was very intriguing that neither Campbell nor the person, whom Campbell deputed, bothered to have a second look at the hymns on the copper plates. They focused only on the book! It was even more surprising that subsequent generations for the next 106 years also did not care to explore these plates. As I observed earlier, these Kirtanas were known but the need of the hour was to codify them, ascribe an appropriate framework with proper notation and interpretation and make them available to all.

It is Annamayya's humbleness and humility that he made fervent plea to the Lord and implored Him to preserve and hide the Kirtanas (దాచుకో నీపాదాలకు దగ నే చేసిన పూజలివి). In fact he wanted to pass into Ages incognito and desired that only the Kirtanas or hymns in praise of Lord Venkateswara should be prevalent in the world. But the Lord had other plans. He wanted to show His gratitude to Annamayya by proclaiming to the world that Annamayya is the source and originator of these Kirtanas. That is why Lord Venkateswara Swami decided to wait for the most appropriate time to get these copper plates rediscovered. The reason is simple. The Lord desired that the literary jewels in the form of Kirtanas or hymns needed polishing in terms of segregation, interpretation, ascribing the most fitting swara and tala to each of them, appreciating the idioms and understanding the full meaning of the text to be made available to all. In short, He waited for personalities like Veturi Prabhakara Sastri Garu and Rallapalli Ananta Krishna Sharma Garu to fulfill the task He envisaged. How fortunate and blessed we are that the Lord has the patience to wait for more than 100 years! It is not just a coincidence that in 1922 when these copper plates were rediscovered, Veturi Sastri garu who was born in 1888, was at peak of his literary productivity. The collection and publication of the vast poetic, devotional and religious literature on Sri Venkateswara, including the greater part of kritis of Tallpaka poets, which have become so ubiquitous today, was all because of his resolute lead and determination. Thanks to his erudition and the ceaseless dedication to unearth the gems of Annamayya Kirtanas, we now are in a position to appreciate Annamayya. Rallapalli Sharma Garu was just 5 years younger and he took over the responsibility of Annamayya project in 1950 after the sad demise of Veturi Sastri garu. I was lucky to have Rallapalli Sharma Garu's audio recording elucidating his tireless efforts to ascribe proper tunes to Annamyya's Kirtanas. Despite the fact that Annamayya was lost for more than 400 years, it seems the people in villages especially in Pudukkotai and Tanjavur regions with Bhajana sampradaya tradition of realizing God had been preserving the tradition of singing Annamayya's Kirtanas. There is

still lot of scope if one has the time and patience to explore this aspect. It is to the credit of these chosen erudite scholars that today we are enjoying Annamayya sahityam. There had been more stalwarts such as Sadhu Subrahmanya Sastry, Vijaya Raghavachary, Arcakam Udayagiri Srinivasacaryulu, and Gauripeddi Ramasubbasarma who did yeomen service in contributing to de-cyphering Annamayya sahityam.

Another thing to note is Annamayya preferred to use the Desi or the indigenous folk forms of literature which enriched the language through the most idiomatic, living expressions of the language prevailing at that time in the region in his Kirtanas. Poetry in the form of metered verse was in the domain of the elite. Song offerings with certain rhyme and tune called pada kavita, unlike the metered verse were practised and popularised by Tallapaka Annamchatulu way back in 15th century. Annamayya must have been a very keen observer of the daily living habits and traditions of his time. He did not leave out even the small petty quibbles or quarrels or even arguments people had and the daily interactions among the peoples. Each one of them had become inspiration and material for his Kirtanas. We find references to human relations, social interactions, dogmas in his Kirtanas. The beauty of Annamayya sahityam is irrespective of the genre of the Kirtanas, the ultimate focus has been realisation of God Almighty through elaborate appreciation of one's social responsibility, interaction and behaviour towards others. His philosophy could very well have been: "first keep the house in order, then work for the society. Practise what is just and right and God Almighty will be yours". He must have been an expert social psychologist par excellence. Unlike current trend of forceful and somewhat intimidating actions to drive one's views, Annamayya's approach had been one of subtly bringing out inconsistencies through similes touching one's heart instantaneously resulting in spontaneous appreciation of the central point. Many of the Sringara and even Adhyatma Kirtanas are of this nature. Annamayya tried his best to inculcate social responsibility among the people through analogies or similes and one need not always look for Adhyatmikata in his Kirtanas.

Annamayya's Kirtanas may be grouped in two ways in the form of a pyramid. One way is to build the pyramid based on the stages of progress of life namely starting from infancy, young, adult, middle age and up to old age. The Kirtanas cater to all age groups. The second way could be by categorisation starting from Sringara, Bhakti, Adhyatmika, and vairagya. The crest or apex in both the cases is the ultimate realisation of the God Almighty.

In fact on the copper plates only two categories are listed: Adhyatmika and Sringara. It is with the classification "sringara", "romantic" or "erotic" I always get confused. This is because, majority of sringara Kirtanas, do not have any reference to sringara but deal with either adhyatmikata or socially relevant issues. We all are familiar with Vishnusahasranama stotram. One of the beautiful names of the Lord is "Adhokshajaha" meaning if one looks inwardly the Lord can be perceived. Pages and pages have been written to interpret this term. Annamayya highlighted this aspect very elegantly in one of the lullaby Kirtanas:

లాలనుచునూచేరు లలనలిరుగడలా He ends the Kirtana with this padam:

తలపులోపల మెలగు తత్త్వప్రదీపా

The Lord resides in one's inner thoughts and shines bright with all His splendour. In another one of the most famous lullaby Kirtanas, which we recite or hum almost daily namely "జో అచ్యుతానంద జో జో ముకుందా", the last padam or charanam reads like this "అంగుగా

తాళ్లపాకన్నయ్య చాలా శృంగార రచనగా చెప్పె ఈ జోలా, సంగటిగ సకల సంపదల నీవేళ మంగళము తిరుపట్ల మదనగోపాలా". Use of the word "Sringara" in a lullaby Kirtana stumped me unless you link that word to "మదనగోపాలా". Except for one charanam, the remaining padams in the Kirtana speak about childhood pranks of Lord Krishna and His valour. When I studied more Kirtanas identified under Sringara genre, I was spellbound about the versatility and the ingenuity of the Vaggeyakara in seamlessly blending the social issues and camouflaging them as Sringara Kirtanas. There, in each of the Kirtanas we come across a subtle social message for harmonious life and the path taken to realizing the God Almighty. Taking married couples or the God Almighty and His consort as benchmark reference, Annamayya wove beautiful fabric of padams to highlight the social issues and also subtly letting us know the solutions. Another important aspect of Annamayya Kirtanas is his adaptation of conversation tone and the listeners are drawn into becoming participants and start identifying themselves either with the subject or the object. In other words, we live through the same moment-by-moment process that the singer articulates—so much so that the *padam*, in the ultimate analysis, is not really narrative or descriptive in content but rather generative and effectual, actually creating an internal atmosphere of participation and taking us through a certain sequence of adoptive practices. Another beauty of Annamayya Kirtanas is they are simple and elegant, easily comprehensible and with profundity, contemporary in nature and with perennial validity, addressed to different strata of society and appreciated by all irrespective of age, gender or status in the society. Let me illustrate by taking two Kirtanas labeled under Adhyatma genre.

సంసారమే మేలు సకల జనులకును కంసాంతకుని భక్తి కలిగితే మేలు

వినయపుమాటల విద్య సాధించితే మేలు తనిసి యప్పులలోన దాగకుంటే మేలు

వెనుకొన్న కోపము విడిచితే మేలు కోరి వొకరినడిగి కొంచపడకుంటే మేలు

Annamayya expounds the virtues of family life and what is expected of family life through a series of suggestions. These include acquiring virtuous wisdom, living life within one's means, renouncing anger and opportunism, not lusting after luxury comforts beyond means, avoiding confrontation, and ultimately longing for the blissful life at the lotus feet of Lord Venkataramana swami. In each charanam, Annamayya espouses the ingredients for righteous living.

Let me cite another Adhyatma Kirtana:

అప్పులేనిసంసార మైనపాటే చాలు తప్పులేనిజీత మొక్కతారమైన జాలు

కంతలేనిగుడిశొక్కగంపంతయిన జాలు చింతలేనియంబలొక్కచేరెడే చాలు

In this Kirtana Annamayya gives criteria for an ideal life without anxiety, and with peaceful and tranquil existence. The lyrics are easy to understand and are in conversation tone and there is no need to give elaborate interpretation. Again toward end, he observes instead of lusting for unfulfilled amorousness, pray for Lord's benevolence.

A few years ago I had an opportunity to pen my interpretation of some of the Annamayya Sringara Kirtanas for Sidney Telugu Sangham for their Annamayya festival. I would like to dwell on three Kirtanas here. It is best not to fit Annamayya's Kirtanas in a rigid frame of only Adhyatma and Sringara genres.

ఓరుపే నేరుపు సుమ్మీ ఉవిదలకు మారుకోకు మగవాని మెత్తనిది చలము సంపాదించవద్దు చనవే మెఱయవే

This Kirtana is of contemporary nature and its essence is relevant even today. Prolonged sustained happiness between couples is governed by the mutual behaviour. Arguments and quibbling or quarrels do not fetch amity, Getting fastidious or harbouring ill feelings result only in animosity. Share not hatred but only affection. Spirit of give and take, accommodative and understanding nature and patience are necessary ingredients for blissful and tranquil life. When these are practiced why only couples even the devotee and God Almighty would come close. Here the couple is only symbolic. Replace them with any two people. The message is clear and powerfully brings out the social obligations and societal responsibilities.

Let us take another Kirtana.

వనితలకు బతికి వలపే కీలు ననుపు గలిగితేను నాను ప్రియములా చిత్తము వచ్చినచోట సెవలెల్లా నీడేరు

In this Kirtana again Annamayya reminds us of our social responsibility and commitment to society through his understanding of family values. According to Annamayya, role of woman is very critical and pivotal for smooth family life or living in a society. A single word used by Annamayya in the Kirtana "Valapu" has different connotations. In fact Annamayya says the word is the key to all. Apart from the generally accepted meaning of Love, the word may be interpreted to mean, as far as this Kirtana is concerned, commitment, involvement, liking, understanding and affection. Just like Valapu is panacea for all the interactions in a family, the same level of understanding is desired in the society too. Another uniqueness of Annamayya Kirtanas is towards end of each Kirtana normally he refers to the Lord and His consort and wishes that the divine pair be a role-model for us.

Another Kirtana:

మరుడు సేసినమాయ మగలకు నాండ్లకు విరసాలు పుట్టవు వేడుకే కాని

A thorough understanding and feeling of togetherness, amicable sense of belonging and amiable behaviour towards each other is the consequence of the actions of cupid on the couples. If we study the Kirtana, we also get the adhyatmic interpretation of the Kirtana that for a devotee completely immersed in the devotion to the Lord, the transient difficulties or obstacles become the stepping stones to realise Him.

Majority of Annamayya's Sringara Kirtanas belong to this category: no eroticism, only a direct, simple enunciation of characteristic human social interactions in thought, speech and deed. It seems Annamayya is simply following and is also advising all of us to practise what has been preached by Lord Krishna in His Gitopadesam to Arjuna in 46, 47, and 48 slokas of 18th Adhyaya in Bhagavad Gita. Again it is not my intention to dwell on the relation between Bhagvad Gita and Annamayya Kirtanas. We will listen to Shri Ravindranath garu on the subject. In fact Dr. Tadepalli Patanjali garu, Reader in a College in Mahaboob Nagar published one book on this subject.

One gets astounded at Annamaya's vast repository of social causes and his ceaseless efforts to address them through his Kirtanas in the simplest language possible to reach each individual. Every Kirtana is the reflection of his sincerity and commitment and his utter

devotion to his ideals. His concern for a just society and its citizenry and the feeling for social cause are amazing. I believe, for Annamayya realizing God is only a byproduct but his real aim with unwavered zeal and focus is to uplift the people and reform the society. It is surprising that we don't come across such Kirtanas being sung at concerts but end up listening to only those most widely recited ones. It is really a challenge to take up unchartered new path in every walk of life leave alone in music. Only the daring ones accept this challenge!

Let me conclude by citing a poem written by Peda Tirumalacharya:

వేదంబులు పౌరాణిక వాదంబులు వర కవిత్వ వాణీ వీణా

నాదంబులు కృత సుజనాహ్లాదంబులు తాళ్ళపాక యన్న య పదముల్

The least we can do is to repeat what Mangalampalli Bala Murali Krishna Garu recited:

అన్నా మయా నీకు సాష్టాంగ వందనమన్నా మయా ఓ అన్న మయ్యా

Thank you and Namaskar